

## Letters of Pope John VIII to the Croatian Prince Branimir

The letters of Pope John VIII to the Croatian Prince Branimir, edited and prefaced by Mate Zekan, Director of the Museum of Croatian Archeological Monuments in Split, are included in his book *Branimir's Croatia in the Letters of Pope John VIII* (Branimirova Hrvatska u pismima pape Ivana VIII). These letters are a significant contribution to our understanding of that momentous watershed in Croatian medieval history, when several important events gave a solid foundation to Croatian history and firmly oriented Croatian political, religious and cultural life towards the civilization of Western Europe.

In contemporary historiography these letters have given rise to numerous discussions and polemics, but they have never been published in their entirety. In Zekan's book all historians and other readers interested in this matter are presented with the facsimiles, reliable transcriptions and translations of this invaluable material. The letters of John VIII have been transcribed by Jakov Stipišić and Miljen Šamšalović and translated with notes by Mirjana Matijević-Sokol. The book was published in 1989 by the Split Literary Circle (Književni krug Split) as the second volume of the series «Books of the Mediterranean» (Knjiga Mediterana).

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# Branimir's Croatia in the Letters of Pope John VIII (Fragment of a study)

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**P**rince Branimir is today the most fully documented of all the rulers of the early medieval Croatian state. Along with five epigraphic monuments found in the original area of the early Croatian state, which praised this ruler and graced the churches in Nin, in Sopot near Benkovac, as well as Ždrapanj near Skradin, Otreš near Bribir and Muć Gornji near Split, the names of Branimir and his wife Maruša (Mariosa cometissa) are also recorded in the evangelistarium in Cividale. Branimir is also indirectly related to three letters of admonishment written in 887 by Pope Stephen V(VI) to Teodosius, Patriarch of Aquileia and Croatian Bishop in charge of the churches in Nin and Split (Salona).

Especially valuable for the study of the relations between the early medieval Croatian state and Dalmatian cities are se-

veral papal letters and notes from the period between the 9th and 11th centuries. The most extensive correspondence from the Vatican Archives, preserved in the Register dated September 1, 876 — August 882, is that of Pope John VIII (872–882).

Of the eleven existing letters kept in several locations, directly related to events in Croatia and Dalmatia (two addressed to Prince Domagoj, one to the clergy and the Croatian people, and one each to the Princes Mutimir and Zdeslav, and the Bulgarian King Michael, the latter presented to the king by the Pope's envoy Teodosius, Bishop of Nin), five letters from that Register, written during the reign of the Croatian Prince Branimir (879 to cca 892) are of particular interest.

### The First Letter

The letter is addressed »to our dear son Branimir« on June 7, 879. The same day two other letters were also dispatched. All three letters were dated by the XII indiction: within the framework of the decade of John VIII's rule (December 18, 872 to December 15, 882) this corresponds to the period from September 1, 878 to August 31, 879. This letter is the reply of Pope John VIII to the letter of Prince Branimir brought by the priest Ivan, and the Pope refers to him as »relegentes nobilitatis tue litteras«. In his letter the Pope commends the loyalty of Branimir and informs him that he conferred his blessing on him and the entire Croatian people on the day of Christ's Ascension.

The letter is kept in the Register on fol. v, ep. 191.

(\* The Register containing the letters of Pope John VIII has been preserved in a copy made in the eight decade of the 11th century in the scriptorium of the Benedictine monastery in Monte Cassino. It is written in angular Beneventan (Lombardic) script, and is known as the »Epistolae Ioannis VIII«. It is kept at the Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, under the signature Reg. Vat. 1 as one of the greatest rarities of the library. It contains 314 of the Pope's letters

to various European rulers, church dignitaries, and the clergy and peoples in general. The Register contains five letters which Pope John VIII sent to our parts in Branimir's time.)

In his first letter addressed to his »dear son Branimir«, to Teodosius, the dean of the holy church in Nin, and all the clergy and the people, Pope John VIII accepts, supports and protects the new Croatian political allegiance. From this reply to Branimir's letter in which, after taking over the Principality, the new Croatian ruler stated his allegiance to the Pope and his return under the wing of the Church of Rome, also acknowledged by his parents, we can clearly infer that before Branimir, and most probably under Zdeslav, the Croats were ruled by Byzantium. After Zdeslav had been deposed, his followers were apparently not entirely subdued. The Pope hopes that the new ruler will subdue them and overcome all his enemies. Pleased that Croatia has returned to the Roman Curia, Pope John VIII readily accepts Branimir's plea for his blessing. He blesses Branimir, with his people and his state in St Peter's in Rome on May 21, 879. According to the international law of that time, and in harmony with the ideology of papal universalism and his right to pronounce on the legality of a ruler and his rule, this act of the Pope must be understood as the recognition of Branimir as lawful ruler and of Croatia as an independent state.

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To our dear son Branimir!

The letter from your noble self, brought to us by Ivan, honored and trusted priest, shows us more clearly than the daylight how great is your faith and true veneration for the Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul and for us.

And since you humbly declare that, as a much loved son, with God's help, you wish in all things to be faithful and obedient to St. Peter and to us, who by God's grace stand in his place, we give great thanks to your noble self in this apostolic letter, and as a beloved son welcome with fatherly love your return beneath the wing of the Holy Apostolic Church, your mother, from whose clear springs your parents also drank the sweet honeyed draughts of holy teachings, and we embrace you in spirit and would strengthen you with apostolic goodness and may the grace and blessing of the Lord and of the first among the apostles, Peter and Paul, and our own rain down upon you, and may you always be in good health and protected from enemies visible and invisible who incessantly lie in wait to the danger of human salvation, so that you may more surely achieve your desired victory over your enemies.

For insofar as you do humbly submit yourself to the Lord and to his Holy Laws and obey Him and honour His priests and His servants for loving the Lord, then victory will without doubt be yours and you will gain mastery over your enemies and rebellious adversaries.

I therefore exhort you, in all that you do, to think of the Lord, to fear Him and with your whole heart to love Him. (...)

And as, through the intermediary of the priest Ivan already mentioned, you have sought from our supreme power that for your greater salvation we should give you our apostolic blessing, this we have gladly done. For, when on the day of the

Ascension of our Lord we celebrated mass at the sacred altar of the blessed apostle Peter, with arms uplifted we blessed you and all your people and the whole of your land, that here and in eternity you might in body and spirit with health, joy and safety rule in your land, and that after your death you might joyfully and eternally dwell with the Lord.

And since we are assured that priest Ivan is truly devoted both to you and to us, we have also entrusted to him our apostolic letter to be delivered to the Bulgarian king.

Therefore we beg that this mission, with your consent, for the love of St Peter and our own, may be accomplished without delay so meriting our manifold gratefulness for your love.

Dispatched on the seventh day in the month of June of the twelfth indiction.